

MODULE SIX

Music and Art

The selected works touch on various ways artists have explored music in art. The images offer a range of opportunities to discuss various styles, forms, and ideas related to movement, rhythm, and other elements related to music. The relationship between music, composition, and art is explored through subject matter, materials, and the overall interaction of the elements within the work.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



Henri Rousseau. *The Sleeping Gypsy*. 1897

- How would you describe this scene?
- What time of day do you think is depicted in this painting?
- Why is this figure carrying a musical instrument? What is her role in society? Where do you think she is coming from? Where might she be going?
- What do you think the relationship is between the person and the lion?

Henri Rousseau (1844–1910) was a self-taught artist who went against the grain of academic style and subject matter by flattening figures and objects. His style was refreshing to some of the leading avant-garde artists of the time, including Pablo Picasso. In *The Sleeping Gypsy*, Rousseau exercises his acute sensibility for color and line in his depiction of a gypsy and lion in the middle of a desert-like setting. With minimal modeling, he reduces all forms to flattened shapes. There is an overall stillness in the setting, giving a dreamlike quality to the work.



Pablo Picasso. *Three Musicians*. 1921

- Which geometric shapes do you see in this image?
- How many musicians are there? How has Picasso depicted these musicians? What material has he used?
- Where might these musicians be performing? What kind of music do you think they are playing?

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Georges Braque were the two pioneers of Cubism, developing it roughly between 1907 and 1914. Their collaboration spawned the collage technique, in which pieces of paper and other materials are adhered to a surface to create an image. *Three Musicians* is characterized by the illusion of this collage technique: the figures are composed of multiple painted shapes that resemble pieces of paper or other materials. Of the three figures, the two characters on the left, a masked Pierrot, or sad clown (far left), and a Harlequin, are associated with the *commedia dell'arte*, a form of improvisational theater that began in Italy in the sixteenth century. While these characters add a certain humor to the scene, the darkened palette lends a somber quality, creating an overall sense of ambiguity in the work.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. *La Goulue at the Moulin Rouge*. 1891–92

- What are the people in this painting doing? Where do you think they are? What are some elements that help you identify the specific time frame and location of this painting?
- How would you describe the central figure? How does she present herself? Can you determine her social status?
- What kind of music do you think is played at this dance hall?

After moving to the Montmartre district of Paris, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) began frequenting dance halls and other social venues. This particular scene illustrates the Moulin Rouge, one of the many cabarets that were a distinguishing feature of Paris nightlife toward the close of the nineteenth century. The painting highlights one particular dancer, Louise Weber, nicknamed “La Goulue,” the reigning belle of this milieu. In his representation of the figures and the dance hall, Toulouse-Lautrec applied artistic techniques learned through his study of Japanese woodblock prints, including a cropped scene, shallow spaces, and outlined figures. These characteristics are also seen in his commercial posters, for which he was well known.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss your favorite music venue. What kind of music is played there? Is there dancing? What kind?



Henri Matisse. *Dance (I)*. 1909

- Where do you think this scene takes place and what are the figures doing?
- What kind of mood do their body positions and movements suggest?
- How do the artist’s decisions regarding color, composition, and lack of detail affect your interpretation of this scene?

Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was one of the main artists of the avant-garde movement known as *Fauvism*, which explored the expressive potential of color. After returning from travels in North Africa, he started to experiment with innovative treatments of the human figure, inspired by classical decorations, African tribal sculpture, and ongoing developments in the work of his contemporaries. *Dance (I)* combines remnants of the Fauvists’ use of color with Matisse’s desire to treat the female form as a fluid visual balance of opposing rhythms and volumes. In the year just before Matisse painted *Dance (I)* he wrote, “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject-matter . . . a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.”

TURN AND TALK: If you were to paint a scene with dancers, what kind of dance would they perform and in what setting? What would the dancers be wearing? Would this performance be a large spectacle or a small show?

Art-Making Activity

In this module, we considered how different artists have incorporated or alluded to music and rhythm in their artistic practice. In this activity, play different styles of music while participants are creating a painting of a figure. Offer some suggestions: a musician, a dancer, a friend, a self-portrait, etc. The best materials for this project are those that can be used more fluidly while the music is being played. Consider using watercolors or acrylic paint. Provide paint brushes of different sizes and large pieces of paper to paint on. Allow participants to work at their own pace.



Romare Bearden. *The Dove*. 1964

- Who and what is represented in this work? Are these elements easy to identify?
- How do you think this work was made? What materials were used?
- In what different ways do movement and rhythm come into play in this work?
- What type of music do you associate with this scene?

Although he studied and worked as an artist for multiple decades before, it was not until 1964 that Romare Bearden (1911–1988) began to make the collages that would become his signature works. In *The Dove*, he uses the collage technique to represent his own Harlem community. This work is part of a series titled *The Prevalence of Ritual*, in which Bearden repeatedly represented the activities that made up everyday existence in his neighborhood. Using imagery found in newspapers and magazines, Bearden created a vibrant and rhythmic street scene.